

Challenging Theatre's Hidden Hierarchies: A Comparison of Christoph Schlingensiefel and Augusto Boal

Anna Torosa Schoor

on and similar papers at core.ac.uk

provided by University of L

In the German cultural landscape of the 1990s, the name Christoph Schlingensiefel (1960–2010) was commonly associated with the epithets ‘agitator’, ‘agent provocateur’ and ‘enfant terrible’. His eclectic theatre productions often engaged with current political and social issues that generated intense media coverage for this film-maker turned theatre director. The primary response to his work consisted of an ambiguous fascination: his detractors disregarded him as a theatrical amateur and publicity-seeking prankster, while his enthusiastic supporters tended towards conferring guru status upon him. Neither of these responses really defuses the political edge of Schlingensiefel’s performance theatre, in which he plays a central role and deliberately creates uncertainty by dissolving clear distinctions between art and reality. The ambiguity of his approach indicates a parallel with the attempts of the historical avant-garde to forcibly close the gap between art and daily life. Analogously, Schlingensiefel has sought to create his own models of ‘unpredictable fields of action’, that are uniquely characterised by ‘improvisation and the participation of the audience’.¹

In a 1997 project, titled *Passion Impossible: Wake Up Call for Germany*, Schlingensiefel engaged in a temporal, creative intervention into the experiences of an underprivileged section of Hamburg’s urban population, whose destitute circumstances he viewed as a social ‘staging’ or production. The meeting point for this marginalised group, located across the road from a major theatre at Hamburg’s main station, led Schlingensiefel to challenge the theatre’s lack of engagement with the pressing social issues literally found on its doorstep. Schlingensiefel identified the theatre – to which he had been invited – as a site of social exclusion and rejected it as a venue in which to rehearse and première a new work. Instead he sought to encourage the participation of the socially marginalised group in the form of activist-style events in the public arena. Schlingensiefel went on to create a number of similar works, including: *Chance 2000*, named for a political party he founded to support the nomination of unemployed and disabled candidates in the 1998 German federal election; *Please Love Austria* (2000), a project that

intervened in Austria's xenophobic politics under a controversial right-wing coalition; and the *Church of Fear* (2003),² which challenged – in both aesthetic and political terms – what has been termed the 'politics of fear'³ as applied to a post-11 September 2001 landscape.

His interest in engaging with contemporary political events and encouraging the active participation of an audience reveal a potential connection to the work of political theatre-maker and theorist Augusto Boal (1931–2009). This article first outlines Schlingensief's interventions in Hamburg and their unexpected consequences. His project is then examined in relation to Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed' in order to locate its similarities to, and differences from, this approach. Finally, I draw upon Erving Goffman's use of drama as a metaphor via which to apprehend social interaction. I argue that, in contrast to Boal's pedagogical approach in which participants 'train ... for real action',⁴ Schlingensief's project had both a different starting point and an unstable dramaturgical basis that cannot be read as consistent with Boal's goals for his Theatre of the Oppressed.⁵ The unpredictable and experimental nature of Schlingensief's project produced, in theatre theorist Baz Kershaw's terms, the 'freedom to reach beyond existing systems of formalised power, ... to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action'.⁶ The form and content of Schlingensief's frequently 'unimaginable' projects urged people to abandon mere spectatorship for direct involvement, as well as demanding that politicians review government policy and take a stand on social issues. In this way, his performances critically intervened in the larger social and political dramas of the time.

Passion Impossible was a durational event that took place over seven days and in diverse public spaces in Hamburg in October 1997. Schlingensief had been invited by the prestigious Deutsches Schauspielhaus to stage a production with its ensemble, but after two days he abandoned the theatre as a place to create a new work and instead turned his attention toward the situation in Hamburg's central railway station. This building, across the road from the Schauspielhaus in St Georg, was a meeting point for the city's homeless people, heroin addicts and prostitutes who, in the absence of other facilities, used the station as a shelter, surviving ever more deteriorating conditions amid police violence, public hostility and political apathy. In the first eight months of 1995, the police had conducted over 30,595 evictions (*Platzverweise*) in and around the area of St Georg. Following numerous charges of police racism and misconduct, Interior Minister Werner Hackman stepped down⁷ but conditions continued to worsen for these station dwellers due to the strong-arm police tactics used to remove them from one of the main entry points to the city.

In view of the dire situation opposite the Schauspielhaus, Schlingensief suggested that the façade of the theatre be torn down and the seats turned around to face the miserable scene across the road – a plan rejected by the

theatre for ‘technical reasons’.⁸ Then, in a compromise negotiated with the management, he agreed to use the theatre for a preliminary event, after which it would be acknowledged in name only as the main sponsor of the action. Thus, *Passion Impossible* began with a ‘benefit gala’ held in the theatre’s plush interior. Here, actors and ‘VIPs’ were invited to participate and auction off their clothing and props to raise funds for a prototype mission that Schlingensief planned to inaugurate the following day for the destitute people at the station.

In the shambolic and dilettantish gala that took place, appeals for donations made by actors and guests were juxtaposed with rather more unusual elements.⁹ Schlingensief, wearing a white, 1970s-style entertainer suit, played the master of ceremonies and attempted to encourage audience donations by exhorting sentimentally, ‘Let’s just be human and open our hearts to the people at the station!’¹⁰ On a large screen a politician made a pre-filmed plea for donations for AIDS patients and Schlingensief and his ensemble danced haphazardly around the stage chanting: ‘We want to help! Help, help, help!’ Over the course of the evening, a gospel choir sang ‘Let It Be’, an auctioneer coerced bids for the guests’ clothing while an actor repeatedly interrupted the proceedings, posing questions such as: ‘What kind of world do we live in where someone has to ask for donations so that a young girl doesn’t have to prostitute herself? What is going on?’¹¹ The uncertainty created by his aggressive interjections was heightened as an onscreen sequence showed an extreme ski sportsman as he lost control on a precipice and – most probably – tumbled hundreds of metres to his death.¹² The audience members began to protest and were then challenged further when an emaciated chicken in a cage was brought onstage, for which three thousand marks was demanded as a donation to save it from execution. Schlingensief announced:

I want to see how much money will be donated to save the life of a chicken. We are all addicted. We are all hooked on a needle. That is the centrepiece of this evening and of this action.¹³

In response to a complaint voiced by a spectator he announced that it was a battery hen, one that many people regularly ate and that its potential decapitation was thus meaningless. ‘Everything can be bought’, he added while the audience loudly expressed their displeasure. An actress from the theatre came onstage and announced that she found the event shameful, that people were being exploited, and that she was distancing herself from the whole dilettantism of the evening, which ended with a freestyle dance to the Bee Gees song ‘Staying Alive’.¹⁴

This ‘gala’ event kick-started the proceedings of the following day, when an empty police station close to the Schauspielhaus was occupied by

Schlingensief and his ensemble. This team – variously costumed as United Nations peacekeepers, police, paramedics, or as Salvation Army personnel – staffed the former police station, turning it into a mission that, for a period of seven days, would offer a programme of events as well as tea, coffee, warm meals and a place to sleep for the station dwellers. The new venue filled up quickly and audience members from the theatre were shepherded into the mission that evening as the Salvation Army band played ‘Praise the Lord’.



Schlingensief with megaphone and colleague. Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg, 1997. Photo: Ahoi.

A small stage with basic lights had been erected and a public forum with an ‘open mike’ was implemented; thus, the destitute people normally found at the main station spoke instead to an audience about their experiences in the former police station. Many had been held there and beaten by police, or left in their cells without food and water for forty-eight hours for their non-observance of a ban from the station.¹⁵ In contrast to the painful testimonies of mission attendees, singing became a central feature of the mission’s activities and gave the group a sense of collective presence both inside and outside its walls. A line from Bertolt Brecht’s *Rosa Luxemburg Fragment* – ‘To look into the face, of someone who’s been helped, is to look into a lovely place, friend, friend, friend!’¹⁶ – sung to the Al Jolson melody, ‘Let Me Sing and I Am Happy’, became the cheerful theme of the event.

On Day Two, Schlingensief and a colleague, dressed as policemen, marched to one of Hamburg’s main shopping thoroughfares in Mönckeberger Street with mission inhabitants and supporters carrying banners reading ‘Hallo You!’ and ‘We Want to Help’. Schlingensief proclaimed to passers-

by through a megaphone: 'This is the Hamburg police; we are overwhelmed, we are exhausted, we are giving up'. It was a point which he underscored by saying, 'If you do not help the homeless and the junkies, it will cost you your lives; we cannot guarantee your safety any longer'.¹⁷ The group was quickly approached by the city police who enquired whether permission had been given to stage the event and asked if Schlingensief was a 'real' policeman. He returned the question, asking the policeman if *he* was real, and a discussion ensued as to whether the action was a demonstration, an advertisement or an artwork. Schlingensief explained that he wanted to find out who was responsible for orchestrating the *mise-en-scène* of Mönckeberger Street and that he and the assembled group – many of whom would not be found shopping there – wished to join in.

During the wait for official checks to be carried out by the police, the group assembled outside Burger King and the actor Bernhard Schutz questioned passers-by, asking, 'Can we imagine a life without Helmut Kohl?' A spectator commented that for one week, Germany's six million unemployed should switch off their televisions and thereby make themselves ready for action (*Einsatzbereit*). This was enthusiastically enlarged upon by Schlingensief and Schutz: 'Turn off the TV, make your own pictures ... something else must be possible here apart from shopping!'¹⁸ Permission finally arrived for the group to proceed after Schlingensief maintained that the march was an art action and that all participants were, in fact, artists. The group was permitted to enter the 'off-limits zone' in front of the town hall and Schutz exhorted participants to 'come inside the protection of your own artwork: the off-limits zone of art!' while encircling them with red and white police tape. That evening, back at the mission, the open microphone was again eagerly utilised and a Japanese singer conducted a 'traditional tea ceremony' in a former police cell.

On Day Three, an improvised church service, advertised as 'High Mass and a Feeding of the 5,000', was celebrated in the station forecourt. Schlingensief, in bishop's robes and policeman's cap, encouraged the congregation to speak about 'your love, your self-doubts and your fears'. Various members of the group came forward to make speeches or voice simple prayers and an actor read 'from the book of André Breton and Jean-François Lyotard' announcing that 'Capitalism will never collapse due to a bad conscience. If it perishes, it will be because of excess.'¹⁹ The mission hits were sung and the mood became euphoric as the crowd danced to 'Staying Alive'. Afterwards, the group visited a local church service unannounced, and, at the end of the service, entered the pulpit to speak to the congregation and minister of their desperate circumstances. The emotional speeches made in the church prompted the group to head back to the theatre,



Tea ceremony in police cell. Photo: Matthias Horn.

where they disturbed a performance of *Peer Gynt* to inform the audience, in unartistic fashion, of their complicity in the misery that lurked outside the theatre doors. This action necessitated the promise of a serious discussion about the mission's future by the theatre manager.²⁰

The next day, a visit was paid to the Scientology headquarters where staff initially refused the mission group entry, unnerved by both their unkempt appearance and the raucous singing of 'Freund, Freund, Freund!'. Schlingensiefel told the spokesperson that they were interested in finding cognitive models via which people could 'transform themselves' and then asked what sort of model Scientology had to offer, and who could participate. The visitors were led into a basement theatre where they were shown a promotional video for Narcolon, a drug currently on trial in Mexican prisons and with which the Scientologists claimed they could cure addiction. The group began to jeer as the video proceeded to show prison inmates – suspiciously vacant-eyed and disoriented – who, according to the voiceover, were now drug-free. In an attempt to calm the viewers, a Scientology representative claimed that three times a week, blankets and grocery items were handed out at the station – a claim hotly contested by its regular dwellers, who insisted that the only things handed out were Scientology books. The mood became increasingly hostile until someone playfully started a conga line and the troupe departed singing. Later that evening, the group visited Hamburg's World of Sex museum where their mixed gender and visibly 'other' appearance surprised a table dancer who, before their arrival, had been performing to a mostly empty room. The missionaries wandered through the exhibit, examined a variety of sexual aids and, for

those who found the display embarrassing, relief came when the bar announced a special low price for the visitors.²¹

Finally, on the evening of Day Six, a large group of mission participants holding lanterns and accompanied by a marching band with drums, took part in a procession to the town hall, where Schlingensiefel demanded that the mission be financially supported by the city and granted permission to remain in the current premises. The press coverage had grown so large by this point that, after persistent attempts to speak to him, the mayor came out to a frenzy of cameras and agreed to visit the mission. Thus on the last day, the lord mayor of Hamburg took a tour of the mission, and, in true bureaucratic fashion, deferred any decisions with promises of 'further discussions'. Refusing to be dismissed by the lord mayor's inconclusive statements, Schlingensiefel initiated a symbolic handing-over of the baton to the director of the theatre, Frank Bambauer, to seal *his* commitment to carrying the mission project forward. After the departure of Schlingensiefel and his group, the Schauspielhaus decided, along with other cultural institutions, to support the mission as an 'artistic measure against the cold'. The homeless, with the aid of a non-profit support committee, would run the mission independently, offering on a daily basis 'art and soup'.²²



March on the town hall. Photo: Matthias Horn.

The events of *Passion Impossible* challenged the perception of cultural critics who viewed Schlingensiefel as a theatrical amateur whose limited talents lay in his skill at heckling politicians and provoking theatre audiences as well as the broader German public.²³ Journalists from major newspapers and television networks closely followed the project with daily reports broadcast on national news programmes. But he was also accused of exploiting the marginalised for his show in order to promote himself and

generate a media spectacle. Journalist Nils Minkmar, writing for *Die Zeit*, exemplifies dismissive mainstream critiques of Schlingensief's work by claiming that it is simply all about his media persona: '[I]n a rebuttal of Marshall McLuhan, Schlingensief proves that the medium is not the message, because the message remains the same in all mediums and it is: Schlingensief!'²⁴ While Minkmar recognises that Schlingensief is often at the centre of his work, displaying a high degree of showmanship that involves extreme volubility and self-posturing, he mistakenly attributes this as egocentrism, a point to which I return later. So what *was* going on in Hamburg? Schlingensief's project and its focus on issues of homelessness and marginalisation, conceived with an implicitly political underpinning, warrants comparison with the work of Brazilian theatre-maker and theorist Augusto Boal, specifically in terms of his 'Theatre of the Oppressed'.

Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed'

Boal is well known for his decades of work in community-based theatre – frequently involving marginalised groups – from which he created his primary working practice known as 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (TO). Throughout his long, international career, Boal created forms of theatre that demanded direct audience participation, such as: Forum Theatre, Invisible Theatre, Legislative and Image Theatre. In the foreword to his first book, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), Boal states: 'All theatre is necessarily political' – a statement that few would care to deny – and further on, he claims its potential as a 'weapon for liberation' at the service of a 'rehearsal for revolution'.²⁵ He also makes frequent references to Brecht and his notion of theatre as a means to reveal the changeability of society via the critically awakened spectator – an idea upon which Boal enlarges to create his vision of the critically active spectator.

More recently, however, his English translator Adrian Jackson emphasises that Boal seeks to avoid labels that would categorise his work as Marxist or Brechtian, stating that such categorisations 'are inimical' to the endeavours of TO.²⁶ I mention this here in order to make an initial distinction between Boal and Schlingensief, which is that the latter did not theorise his work in terms of a political ideology nor within a tradition of political theatre discourse such as that of Piscator and Brecht. Schlingensief's work does not spring from an engagement with pedagogy, unlike Boal's, which is deeply indebted to the work of Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire (1921–97), whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) inspired Boal's own theatrical treatises, and the therapeutic techniques of Jacob Moreno who is acknowledged as the founder of psychodrama.²⁷

However, both Boal and Schlingensief sought to challenge theatre-going as a leisure activity enjoyed primarily by the dominant and socially privileged classes. In Boal's Forum Theatre process, spectators are invited to

witness a short play, identified as the ‘anti-model’, that usually portrays a situation of oppression, which has a cumulatively negative impact on the life and circumstances of its central character. After the play, a discussion facilitated by a master of ceremonies known as the ‘Joker’ encourages audience members to intervene in a second run of the play. The challenge given them is to change the actions of the central protagonist in order to draw out possible alternatives that may contain the potential to improve the outcome for him or her. The audience made active are, in Boal’s terminology, ‘spect-actors’ who embody the dual function of both observation and acting. This dual function extends into the practice of ‘Invisible Theatre’, whereby an issue considered to be of current relevance is raised and then explored by actors in rehearsals before being performed in a public space. The general public, who are unaware that they are watching a piece of theatre, unwittingly become the improvisational spect-actors as they debate, argue and intervene in the various plot points of the scenario as it is played out.

For Boal, the intended goal of Forum and Invisible Theatre work ‘is to change the people – “spect-actors” – ... into actors, transformers of the dramatic action’.²⁸ His objective is for participants to seek out potential alternatives for change within an oppressive situation and to use the theatre workshop environment as a training ground for ‘action in real life’.²⁹ While Boal’s well-documented approach has undeniably been beneficial to many Forum Theatre participants, there are significant differences to observe in relation to Schlingensiefel’s project.

Schlingensiefel and non-pedagogical, experimental dramaturgy

Passion Impossible required neither a rehearsal nor training process and there was no explicit pedagogic mechanism in play that sought to empower individuals for ‘action in real life’. Rather, each event over the seven days took place in ‘real time’, in ‘real situations’ and, as such, relied solely on improvisation rather than rehearsed alternatives. Events were planned on a daily basis and spontaneous suggestions made by participants were also integrated. Schlingensiefel constantly destabilised the *modus operandi* of his project, moving between pathos and humour, earnestness and embarrassment, stage and street, foregrounding – and at times forcibly creating – a relationship between art and politics in everyday life. This relationship was evident in the encounter with the police in the shopping zone that was resolved with humour, and the final lantern march on the town hall, in which the participants earnestly demanded support for the mission project. Commenting on the spontaneous and flexible nature of his work, Schlingensiefel has said:

Letting go of control mechanisms while simultaneously recognising this as part of a staging, finding oneself in a fluid

state – this is what my theatre revolves around ... I want to convince life that it is for the most part staged, and theatre, that it is absolutely dependent on life.³⁰

The 'control mechanisms' to which he refers imply the socialising process by which one learns how to conduct oneself in various situations in order to comply with the accepted conventions. For Schlingensief, these social conventions are themselves part of a 'staging' and his insistence upon recognising the 'staged' aspect of life extended to the benefit gala evening, which, in all its crassness, exposed the 'performance' of attending such occasions to demonstrate one's concern with a charitable cause. 'The space is monitoring us' (*Der Raum überprüft uns*)³¹ was a slogan employed by Schlingensief throughout the event to encourage an awareness of how different environments – from theatre to church, from station to sex museum – affect social behaviour and demeanour. The enquiry into the dramaturgy of diverse spaces and the loose method of working, with opportunities for chance occurrences, new risks and possible failure, is what drove the action and allowed it to build an authentic momentum without pre-planned goals having to be met. No statement of overarching intent was made, nor a potentially desired outcome prescribed.

The only set piece of the work was a mnemonic device in the form of a new video monitor installed in the mission premises each day that showed footage of the previous day's activities. Within the close quarters of the mission, the video monitors – described by Schlingensief as an 'Advents Calendar',³² – functioned as a form of 'group memory': a reminder of how the past influences and helps to create the present. The calendar metaphor describes the manner in which small scenes, or separate moments, join together to achieve a momentum and to create something larger than could be identified in the individual moment of their occurrence. The visual memory of the recent past and its catalytic effect on the present formed a key component of the *mise-en-scène* of *Passion Impossible* that, at its core, relied heavily upon contingency, with all the uncertainty that the term implies.

This latter feature of Schlingensief's project does reveal an interest in common with Boal's approach. Performance theorist Richard Schechner addresses the role of contingency in Boalian theatre models in an interview:

The essence of forum and invisible theatre is that they function on contingency. In other words, they take Brecht and Marx seriously – history is being made in the moment. Contrarily, the ideology and practice of media is that history was made earlier: what you see is finished, not changeable. Even if there are only a few seconds delay. So if you want to express the contingency of history and the possibility that ordinary people can affect

history, even their local history ... then you have to be on the side of live performance.³³

Schechner points out that the media functions via its portrayal of the past that focuses on the unchangeability of what has already occurred. The idea that history is 'made in the moment' and can be changed by 'ordinary people' is given credence by both Boal and Schlingensief. The telling of personal stories serves as a starting point to examine issues of oppression for both artists, where 'The very act of speaking one's story publicly is a move toward subjecthood, toward agency with political implications'.³⁴ Nonetheless, there is a critical disparity. In the forum process, the spect-actor is engaged in playing out alternative scenarios for an oppressed protagonist in the hope that options can be found that may empower him or her to change his or her circumstances. While the dialogue with onstage characters can be viewed as reciprocally liberating for the actors and spect-actors, for Boal it is '[n]o matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action!'.³⁵ In fact, I would argue that it does indeed matter whether a scenario remains fictional and thus fully in the terrain of theatre, or whether the protagonist is able to effect change in their situation in reality. The question of efficacy in terms of an oppressed individual's success in changing their circumstances after the forum workshops remains an open one.

In Schlingensief's event, the Boalian anti-model, or play, can be seen as the entirety of the predicament experienced by the socially destitute in Hamburg which he, in turn, sought to change by means of direct intervention. The openly experimental approach employed by Schlingensief reveals its dissimilarity to a pedagogical process such as Forum Theatre, which, in its essence, can only constitute a preparation for action in the external world. The challenge for Schlingensief was to confront the social dramaturgy of Hamburg's city centre where the theatre, as 'art', resided in moribund artistic isolation, divorced from the depressing social reality, or 'life', across the road. However, while the theatre was abandoned as a venue, Schlingensief did not, it seems, intend to abandon theatricality. What he was in fact rejecting was the 'as if' of theatrical realism and the fourth wall, in favour of a utopian 'what if' of theatrical 'opportunism' that viewed the various locations in Hamburg as a giant stage upon which 'scenes' could be interrupted and restaged. In a sense, his demand was for the potential of art to envision something else where, it seems, life could not. The various uniforms worn by the mission team, the invitation to a theatre audience to attend events with the mission group, the playful impersonation of police officers, the celebration of an anarchic public mass and the employment of a brass band, all point to an excess of theatricality, rather than an interest in charity or social work. Yet the political nature of the project also demands examination.

Theatre theorist Joe Kelleher succinctly describes politics as the 'working out of relations of power in a given situation'. He considers a theatre audience's involvement in witnessing the representation of political issues onstage to be related to 'our recognizing that the scenes that appear only to play before us in an external world "out there" also involve ourselves; that we are also in the picture, that we may also be actors in the scene ...'.³⁶ Schlingensiefel's project – conducted outside the theatre but with its means – literally tested out Kelleher's proposition that an audience is cognisant of its collusion in socio-political events. Their awareness as such was reinforced by their spirited participation in his activities so that, beyond the fourth wall of the theatre, they could view themselves as 'actors in the scene'.

Goffman: social interaction as theatrical performance

The notion of life's being 'staged' brings to mind Erving Goffman's perception of social encounters as micro-performances, which he conceptualised in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.³⁷ Goffman posits that we, as individuals, are constantly engaged in a process of creating ourselves both as character and performer, in an attempt to 'guide and control' the reactions of others toward us.³⁸ The desire to control our own performance extends to our behaviour in society, including the spaces we live and work in, as well as those we encounter as part of our daily routines. In Goffman's view, the 'means for producing and maintaining selves' is inextricably bound up with the dramaturgy of 'social establishments', that is, 'any place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place'.³⁹ Central to Goffman's thesis is his identification of 'front' and 'back' regions that pertain both to the performances of individuals and to those of social establishments.⁴⁰

The *front region* is where the performance occurs and is connected to decorum and how one comports oneself within the visual and aural range of others.⁴¹ It connects also to the idea of a *personal front*, which reveals qualities of the performer such as social status, sex, age, racial characteristics, and approximate earning power through variables such as clothing and accessories. The *back region* is analogous to backstage, whereby certain elements belonging to the front region can be adjusted or changed by the performer according to the nature of the activity or scene. In this region, the performer can behave informally away from the gaze of those for whom his or her performance is intended, and discrepancies or secrets can be made visible. Keeping the *back region* hidden from view is a primary technique of what Goffman calls 'impression management': the attempt on the part of the performer to convincingly portray an idealised version of oneself to onlookers.⁴²

Schlingensiefel challenged the notion of an 'idealised self' in his 'benefit gala' event where the audience members were left uncertain in regard to his motivation and disturbingly confronted with the threatened decapitation of a chicken and a combination of tacky guest performances. His comment 'we are all addicts' questioned their unwillingness – as socially privileged individuals – to concede their own complicity in the unjust processes of daily life. For him, the vested interest in believing in one's innate innocence – or, at least, one's performance of it – is at the root of social injustice. What is addictive, in this context, is the desire to permanently position oneself as being beyond reproach. During the gala event, Schlingensiefel critiqued the ethos of needing to be entertained before taking any kind of ethical action to help others. Moreover, the idea of including the audience as part of an event staged in a world of destitution and hopelessness – a parallel world which the marginalised had forcibly become accustomed to – was heightened by having them pay for tickets to participate in the various activities inside and outside the mission. As spectators, they were normally excluded from such scenes of deprivation by means of status, money and, perhaps, lack of interest. Paying to be included was, in addition, an ironic comment on the socially destitute who can participate in penury for free.



Soup and art for all. Photo: Matthias Horn.

The intention to forcibly generate visibility for the socially marginalised was further demonstrated by Schlingensiefel's deliberate disruption of the classical play *Peer Gynt*. The unexpected appearance onstage – in the 'front' area of the theatre – of people from the 'back' region of the station constituted both a breach in the staging of 'everyday' life and a disruption of the business-as-usual activities of the theatre. The discomfort occasioned by the disturbance, as noted previously, prompted a quick response from the

theatre management. Schlingensiefel's direct intervention into what constitutes conventionally mainstream theatre practice underscores his confrontational relationship with this particular 'social institution'.⁴³ In line with Baz Kershaw, he recognises theatre as a 'disciplinary system' that ensures the automatic accessibility of theatrical events for those privileged enough to afford entry.⁴⁴ As such, it does not extend its invitations to those on the economic margins, or those with potentially disruptive voices unless – as happened in Hamburg – they arrive uninvited.

However, it was Schlingensiefel's reflexive utilisation of his persona that allowed him to control which aspect or 'front' of his character – from benefit gala host, to policeman, priest and agitator – was revealed to the audience. The effect of changing roles according to the situation enabled Schlingensiefel to playfully facilitate a renegotiation of public spaces in order to make space for socially underprivileged groups usually rendered invisible within the city's infra-structural 'staging'. By appropriating the props and clothing of various authority figures, Schlingensiefel was able to question their functions; the costumes, when worn together in public, created a semiotic slippage which implied that authority figures themselves were – in essence – costumed characters, therefore less threatening and more approachable than generally imagined. As a result of this, the marginalised gained confidence in the public incursions and less fearful of authoritarian backlash due to Schlingensiefel's ability to theatricalise potentially risky situations by reframing them as art. Hence, I would argue – in response to claims of egocentricity as the centrifugal point of his work – that because of the vulnerable circumstances of the participants, Schlingensiefel needed to be not only accountable but also present in the work as an interlocutor. The centrality of his presence was imperative in a work that demanded active participation and involved the manipulation of the customary social order; in this case, the distance of the artist would actually indicate a very cynical position.

Schlingensiefel's exploration of public spaces, which prioritised the visibility of marginalised people, constituted a radical breaching of the social order and sought to expose the hidden hierarchies of theatre that underpin its standing as a form of cultural expression which privileges social status and wealth. The events of *Passion Impossible* reversed the normal social divisions of front and back, thus refusing to be kept hidden in the back regions of the city – where the marginalised are usually permitted to assemble to receive charity – or relegated to the fringes of political discourse. From Day Three onwards, the rediscovery of a public voice and some political clout led the mission inhabitants, removed from their roles as isolated examples of abjection, to call for the legitimisation of this new form of 'social culture' and its headquarters in the mission.



High mass at the main station. Photo: Matthias Horn.

Although not identified with a particular political philosophy, this action was a direct enquiry into the cultural life of a city and questioned who was permitted to be included in cultural events. The positive repercussions of *Passion Impossible*, while not planned by Schlingensief, encapsulate the potential of innovative modes of performance to intervene in the production and consumption of culture. Arguably more social experiment than charitable exercise, in this instance, a significant outcome and increased agency for people marked by stigma was achieved.

* * *

A version of this article won the Veronica Kelly Prize for the outstanding student paper at the July 2010 conference of the Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies (ADSA) at the Australian National University, Canberra.

NOTE

- 1 Günther Berghaus, *Avant-garde Performance, Live Events and Electronic Technologies* (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 23.
- 2 Both former projects have been critically examined in T. Forrest and A. T. Scheer, eds, *Christoph Schlingensief: Art Without Borders* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2010), while the *Church of Fear* was the focus of my essay 'Don't Expect Too Much from the End of the World! Christoph Schlingensief's *Church of Fear*' in *antiTHESIS* 20 (University of Melbourne 2010): 92–111. Sections of

- the present article have been published previously in the aforementioned book for which Intellect holds the copyright and which I am permitted to include here. As I wish to re-examine Schlingensief's *Passion Impossible* in contrast to Boal's forum theatre work, I have extended my description of the project for this article.
- 3 See, for example, Frank Füredi, *Politics of Fear* (London & New York: Continuum Books, 2005) and David L. Altheide, *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006).
 - 4 Augusto Boal, trans. C and M. L. McBride, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 1979) 122.
 - 5 At the time of writing, I am aware that a book has recently been published in German, titled *Augusto Boal und Christoph Schlingensief: Zwei Rebellen in der Theaterlandschaft*, by Brigitte Bauer. While the book appears to be a comparative study of both theatre-makers under discussion here, I have not been able to access it as yet.
 - 6 Baz Kershaw, 'Pathologies of Hope in Drama and Theatre' in M. Balfour, ed., *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice* (Bristol, UK; Portland, USA: Intellect, 2004) 36.
 - 7 Manfred Mahr, 'Polizeiübergrieffe als "Strafe vor Ort", Grundrechte-Report zur Lage der Bürger- und Menschenrechte in Deutschland' (1997). Online: <<http://www.grundrechte-report.de/1997/inhalt/details/back/inhalt-1997/article/polizeiuebergrieffe-als-strafe-vor-ort-1/>> (accessed 21 March 2009).
 - 8 Till Briegleb, '7 Tage Notruf für Deutschland: Ein Bahnhofs Mission' in J. Lochte and W. Schulz, *Schlingensief! Notruf für Deutschland* (Hamburg: Rotbuch Verlag, 1998) 100–1.
 - 9 My descriptions of the performance, the mission and the events are based on Briegleb's account in Lochte and Schulz and the documentary film, *Freund, Freund, Freund!* by Alexander Grasseck and Stefan Corinth, ZDF/arte Germany, 1998.
 - 10 Briegleb 103.
 - 11 *Ibid* 108.
 - 12 *Ibid* 105.
 - 13 *Ibid* 107.
 - 14 *Ibid* 108.
 - 15 *Ibid* 117.
 - 16 See W. Mittenzwei and K. D. Müller, eds, *Bertolt Brecht Werke, Stücke 10* (Suhrkamp Verlag: Frankfurt-am-Main, 1991) 981. My translation.
 - 17 Quoted from the documentary film, *Freund, Freund, Freund!*
 - 18 *Ibid*.
 - 19 Briegleb 119.
 - 20 *Ibid* 121.
 - 21 *Ibid* 133.
 - 22 *Ibid* 134–5.
 - 23 Elke Schmitter, 'Christoph Schlingensief's "Bahnhofsmission – 7 Tage Notruf für Deutschland" im Deutschen Schauspielhaus, Hamburg', *Die Zeit*, 1997. Online: <<http://www.zeit.de/1997/44/schlinge.txt.19971024.xml>> (accessed 5 May 2009).
 - 24 Nils Minkmar, 'Fernsehen: Pro und contra Christoph Schlingensief', *Die Zeit* (7 December 2000): 34.

- 25 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* ix and 122.
- 26 Adrian Jackson, translator's introduction to Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-actors* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992) xxiii.
- 27 See Daniel Feldhendler, 'Augusto Boal and Jacob L. Moreno: Theatre and Therapy' in M. Schutzman and J. Cohen-Cruz, eds, *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 28 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 122.
- 29 Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-actors* 231.
- 30 Christoph Schlingensief, 'Wir sind zwar nicht gut, aber wir sind da' in Lichte and Schulz, 13–14.
- 31 *Ibid* 12.
- 32 *Ibid* 23.
- 33 Schechner cited in Boal interview with M. Taussig, 'Boal in Brazil, France The USA' in Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 21–2.
- 34 Jan Cohen-Cruz, 'Redefining the Private: From Personal Storytelling to Political Act' in J. Cohen-Cruz and M. Schutzman, eds, *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theatre and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 104.
- 35 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 122.
- 36 Joe Kelleher, *Theatre and Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 13.
- 37 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).
- 38 *Ibid* xi.
- 39 *Ibid* 238.
- 40 *Ibid* 107–12.
- 41 *Ibid* 107.
- 42 *Ibid* 208.
- 43 Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999) 32.
- 44 *Ibid* 31.

Copyright of Australasian Drama Studies is the property of La Trobe University, Theatre & Drama Program and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.